

Video game development and digital arts achieve local critical mass

High-profile film and television production scene combined with video game, digital effects and animation studios pushes Vancouver to forefront of digital arts



VANCOUVER FILM SCHOOL

Industry training: careers in video game development and digital arts increasingly depend on an educated workforce

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Careers in video game development and digital arts, such as visual effects and animation, require more than an appreciation of gamer culture and its associated coolness factor.

Training, experience and a clear understanding of what exactly one wants to do are all essential to break into the industry. Vancouver is widely considered to be a global hub of excellence in the fields of video game development and digital effects and animation. The unique confluence of those industries has resulted in a critical mass of like-minded businesses and employment and educational opportunities.

"The demands of the digital arts and video game design industries increase as the complexity of the products that are built and the tools that are used to build them increase," said **Marc Aubanel**, academic director for game art and design and visual-game programming at the **Art Institute**

of **Vancouver**.

As we are able to process, store and manipulate data better, developers find clever ways to use this additional horsepower, he said. Tools and software are built to harness this enhanced power.

"The difference between what it took to make a game in the '90s when the industry blossomed to today is dramatic," according to Aubanel. "I predict this will continue even further moving forward. The knowledge of a current entry-level employee in the digital business today is greater than working professionals in the past. In 10 years, the same will be true when comparing them to professionals of today."

Radio, film, television, the Internet, social media and video games are slowly converging. "This means that demands on tomorrow's digital workers will reward people who have a good understanding of all of these fields and the different ways they are merging," he said. Those considering entering this field need

to closely look at the kind of job they want and the kind of company they are working for.

"Education is a large part of what will give you an advantage for seeking employment," said Aubanel. "You need to be well-trained on computers and the specialized software used. You also need the core skills of the trade you are pursuing. It is also critical that you are able to work within the confines of a large team and learn how to effectively manage the software development process."

People need to be very passionate and dedicated to game development – not playing games, but making them, according to Aubanel

"Without this single-minded dedication, you are at a disadvantage to the thousands of others who are passionately pursuing a job in this industry," he said. "It is a community that hires a very wide, diverse group of people, so the most important element is your life-long commitment to gaining excellence."

Slant Six Games talent

manager **Anna Sloan** recommends anyone with an interest in the industry research what roles they are interested in, starting with *Wikipedia* and moving onto *Gamasutra.com* or *GamesIndustry.biz*.

Different video game development jobs can include producer, game programmer, game artist, game designer and game tester. Sound design is another important aspect.

"Game artists and game programmers definitely require post-secondary schooling," she said. "Game designers typically have post-secondary schooling as well, but it is possible to obtain such a position by starting out as a game tester."

Producers typically have post-secondary schooling, but there are no hard and fast rules. "The main thing is that producers should know about the business from the ground up. A lot of producers worked their way up from starting out as a game tester, who does not typically require any work experience or schooling," she said. Game testing is seen as a way into the industry, according to Sloan.

Producers working in the film industry have been known to make the switch to video games successfully without requiring further education, she added. Animators generally have no problem moving from one industry into the other.

However, game programming is typically seen as a very specialized field, so education would be the best bridge to move from one field to another, Sloan recommends.

Dave Warfield, head of game design for **Vancouver Film School**, also recommends that those interested in a career be acutely aware of what it is that they want to do.

"I usually ask what types of games do they play because as a designer you have to play lots of different types of games and you have to analyze everything you play," he said. "It may seem like fun and games, but it's actually a lot of work."

With video games and game teams getting larger, specialization becomes more and more important, he said. It allows an individual to focus on a specific area of game design and show what they can bring to a development team. Designers with skills in all areas have a tougher job to show how diverse their skill set is. According to Warfield, if a company is looking for someone to do a specific job, and there is someone that specializes in that area, there is a natural fit.

"There is a lot of crossover between the different forms of entertainment, and that continues to become more and more the case," he said. Game designers have to understand how story and content function when players do the unexpected and have to design based on creating that type of path choice or user freedom. In linear entertainment such as television and film, the focus is on presenting the story and taking the viewer on a ride, a ride where the path is already decided. Both forms still have to develop a story, plan the world, the characters and how that will be shown to the viewer. "An education in those areas coupled with an understanding of play and

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head of game design,
Vancouver Film School

player choice gives those with specific skills an opportunity to bring those skills to either interactive or linear entertainment," he said.

Passion for the medium is essential for those interested in pursuing a video game development career, according to **Electronic Arts** spokesman **Colin Macrae**.

"EA and others are always interested in people who have a huge passion for video games as well as their craft," he said. "Education is key as the video game industry is no longer a self-taught craft. Degrees in digital art, engineering, computer science, business and others are the key ones that will launch a career in video games."

Macrae agrees video game development and television

and film production are converging, creating a unique set of employment options locally.

"In a market like Vancouver where you have strong film and television and video game industries, there's a larger menu of employment options for people. We hire people from the film, television and animation industries and vice versa. There's always new tools to learn and new skills to acquire, but that's part of the ongoing growth and development that anybody in our industry needs to follow."

Digital Domain Vancouver recruiting supervisor **Karen Suckles** said that while the studio prefers hiring people who have experience in visual effects for feature films work, they do hire people from the digital animation and video game sectors.

"It mostly depends on the skill set they bring to the table and their creative eye," she said.

A mix of experience and education is ideal. Those coming straight out of school tend to be brought in on an internship to help them gain the knowledge and experience necessary to work within a production pipeline.

Suckles added: "We will take people on straight out of school, ideally putting them through an internship program first and then rolling them onto a show."

Digital Domain is still hiring, primarily for a few high-level positions, she confirmed. With about 40 employees currently, she said the studio would grow by another 20 or so in the coming months.

"It's in a variety of disciplines and at variety of levels," she said. "As we learn more about what's coming, I think we are definitely going to be growing beyond that."

A solid reel is what will get you noticed, she said.

"The only thing we have to go off is their work history and showing us solid samples of work. A solid resumé that is clear is important. Keep it simple, but as clear as possible. A lot of it comes down to timing. What the needs are and if there are skill set matches.

"But to get noticed its really going to be the reel." ■
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